

Preliminary insights on participation in an audio-assisted extensive reading program and proficiency among young learners of English as a foreign language

日本人小学生英語学習者の音声併用多読学習と英語力に関する予備的考察

Katherine SHREVES

Abstract

Extensive reading is often promoted for its potential to increase motivation and learning outcomes among language students. While more common in secondary and tertiary education, extensive reading has also been utilized with young learners of English as a foreign language. Using data gathered from Grade 5 and 6 students at a private Japanese elementary school, this study explores the relationship between participation in an audio-assisted extensive reading program and scores on a standardized proficiency test. Results from correlation analysis of reading log and test score data suggest a tendency for lower-proficiency young learners to have greater participation in the program than their higher-proficiency peers. However, these results did not attain high levels of statistical significance. The outcome of the study emphasizes the importance of continuing research on extensive reading to more deeply understand the young learner experience.

Keywords : English/EFL/extensive reading/TEYL/YLE/young learners

I Introduction

Extensive reading has been employed in classes of English as a second or foreign language for a number of years. Extensive reading, as described in the influential work by Day and Bamford (1998), is an approach that prioritizes reading a wide range of materials for pleasure. It is learner-led, whereby an individual can freely select and engage with reading material in a setting that suits them, whether it be in or outside of the classroom. Emphasis is placed on reading material that a particular language learner can easily comprehend. While the learner need not know all words in their reading material, neither should it be too challenging. The teacher plays the role of reading model and guide to help learners develop their own reading practice.

It is strongly believed by Day and Bamford (1998) that this approach to reading has an array of benefits

for the language learner. The benefits often cited by these authors and others include developing a positive attitude towards reading in another language, increasing learner motivation, facilitating vocabulary acquisition, and generally raising learners' linguistic competence. Meta-analyses of extensive reading research by Krashen (2007), Nakanishi (2015), Jeon and Day (2016), and Liu and Zhang (2018) go further to illuminate the various effects of extensive reading on learners.

The potential benefits of extensive reading led to the adoption of a modified, audio-assisted program at the elementary school where this researcher is an assistant language teacher. During class time, it has been easy to observe the positive impact of the program on students' interest in reading in a foreign language. These young learners appear to greatly enjoy selecting their reading material, often taking recommendations from one another and attempting to reserve books with their classmates. Developing curious, eager readers who find joy in the activity is a worthy goal in and of

itself. Nevertheless, there is a certain pressure to ensure that such a program is delivering more than positive gains in affect. In implementing the program, it was hoped that increased exposure to English would lead to gains in all of the four language learning skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

To further investigate the relationship of this audio-assisted extensive reading program on English proficiency in these four skills, the following research question was formulated:

Does greater participation in an audio-assisted extensive reading program correlate with greater proficiency in listening, reading, speaking, and writing among young learners of English as a foreign language?

Conceived as a first step in a larger line of inquiry, insight acquired through seeking to answer the research question is intended to inform future research on the program.

II Research Methods

Participants

The young learner population studied consisted of students in one Grade 5 and one Grade 6 class at a private elementary school in Japan. These classes had 10 and 19 students respectively.

Extensive Reading Context

At this elementary school, English is taught as a *subject*, as opposed to an *activity*, from Grade 1 onwards. The school implemented an audio-assisted extensive reading program for all grades in the two academic years prior to the study period. Among Grade 5 and 6 students, 28 of 29 participated in the program for this entire length of time.

In this program, students borrow one book with a CD of narration per week. The available books are from a graded-reader series for children. Students may freely choose their book according to their own interests. Students are guided to select books from a level deemed appropriate for their class, though there is some flexibility for both higher and lower-level students to depart from this. To track their reading,

students use a reading log to note the titles they have read and tally the number of times they have read each selection. After a week, parents and teachers initial the reading log, and students exchange their book for another.

Data Collection: Participation

To indicate students' participation level with the extensive reading program, data was collected from their reading logs. The available data allowed for four variables to be identified as measures of participation:

1. *Total number of books a student borrowed*
2. *Total number of books a student read*
3. *Total reading tally*
4. *Average reading tally per book read*

Both 1. and 2. were used as variables because of a small number of instances in which students indicated in their reading logs that they had borrowed a book but did not indicate having read it. Because the act of choosing a book requires some level, albeit much reduced, of participation, this variable was also included. It is also possible that students did, in fact, read a book that they neglected to include a tally for. Additionally, while the program calls for each student to borrow a new book every week, there were weeks when students either forgot to do so or chose to continue reading the previous selection. This created some difference in the number of books children borrowed.

While the reading logs were kept for the entirety of the academic year, only entries up until the point when data for proficiency, detailed below, was collected were counted. One Grade 5 and one Grade 6 student had to be removed from the study due to lost reading logs.

Data Collection: Proficiency

Students' scores from the GTEC Junior Plus test were used to indicate English proficiency. The GTEC Junior Plus test was not administered exclusively for this research project, but is an assessment used by the school annually.

The GTEC Junior Plus test produces distinct scores

for each of the four skills. Each of these scores was included as a variable in the study. The total score, which is a sum of the sub-scores, was also used. Additionally, The GTEC Junior Plus test assigns each student a “Junior Grade” of 1-5 with the 5 indicating the highest level of proficiency. Therefore, the following six variables were used as measures of proficiency:

1. GTEC Junior grade
2. GTEC Junior Plus total score
3. GTEC Junior Plus listening score
4. GTEC Junior Plus reading score
5. GTEC Junior Plus speaking score
6. GTEC Junior Plus writing score

Data Analysis

Participation and proficiency variables were paired and analyzed for correlation by determining Pearson’s correlation coefficient (*r*). Data from Grade 5 and Grade 6 were analyzed separately. While both classes took the same GTEC Junior Plus test, it can be

assumed that Grade 6 would score higher on the test than their Grade 5 counterparts due to their additional year of English education. In addition, they were guided to read books of a higher grade.

III Results

Results of the correlation analysis can be seen below for Grade 5 in *Figure 1* and Grade 6 in *Figure 2*.

Only one pair of variables for Grade 5 was found to have statistical significance at the $p < .05$ level, which is marked by an asterisk (*) in *Figure 1*. No pair of variables in either the Grade 5 or Grade 6 data was found to have statistical significance at the $p < .01$ level.

For Grade 5, all pairs of variables but one had a negative correlation. The effect size ranged from .00 to -.68. For Grade 6, 13 of the 24 pairs of variables had negative correlations. The effect size ranged from -.23 to +.11.

		Books borrowed	Books read	Total reading tally	Average tally per book read
Junior Grade	Pearson’s <i>r</i>	-.44	-.41	-.28	-.16
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.234	.271	.468	.678
Total Score	Pearson’s <i>r</i>	-.46	-.43	-.27	-.13
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.208	.243	.490	.734
Listening Score	Pearson’s <i>r</i>	-.43	-.40	-.19	-.05
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.246	.282	.627	.902
Reading Score	Pearson’s <i>r</i>	-.14	-.04	-.11	-.17
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.725	.929	.788	.660
Speaking Score	Pearson’s <i>r</i>	-.64	-.68*	-.43	-.21
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.064	.044	.247	.591
Writing Score	Pearson’s <i>r</i>	-.41	-.43	-.20	.00
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.276	.255	.600	.997

Figure 1: Correlation analysis of Grade 5 ($n=9$)

		Books borrowed	Books read	Total reading tally	Average tally per book read
Junior Grade	Pearson's <i>r</i>	.06	.05	-.02	-.13
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.803	.844	.949	.620
Total Score	Pearson's <i>r</i>	.00	-.01	-.01	-.05
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.991	.960	.985	.835
Listening Score	Pearson's <i>r</i>	.02	.00	-.03	-.11
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.954	.988	.898	.671
Reading Score	Pearson's <i>r</i>	.06	.04	-.10	-.23
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.821	.861	.701	.366
Speaking Score	Pearson's <i>r</i>	-.03	-.04	.09	.11
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.910	.891	.714	.667
Writing Score	Pearson's <i>r</i>	-.11	-.12	.04	.11
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.660	.646	.865	.654

Figure 2: Correlation analysis of Grade 6 (*n*=18)

IV Discussion

At first glance, these results may seem counterintuitive and perhaps even disheartening to those researchers and educators who are proponents of extensive reading. They appear to indicate that participation in extensive reading in English has a statistically insignificant relationship to proficiency. The high prevalence of negative correlations, statistically significant or not, further appears to associate increased participation with lower test scores. However, further consideration of both the research methods and results of this study reveal that caution should be exercised when interpreting these findings.

Limitations: Participation Data

Because data taken from reading logs was self-reported by students, its accuracy comes into question. While students were not incentivized to inflate their reading tally through prizes or other such commendation, they may still have done so to please teachers and parents or to impress classmates.

Legibility was also an occasional issue. Tally marks written by students in haste, for example, required interpretation of their intended number. Additionally, when a reading log indicated that a student received a certain book, but there were no accompanying tally marks, it was assumed that the student had not read it. This may not have been the case, but rather an accidental omission.

The decision to measure participation by the number of books and tally marks is also problematic. This data speaks to frequency but tells nothing about the depth of engagement. One tally mark could indicate vastly different reading engagement levels from one young learner to the next. It could represent both a brief perusal of the pages or a concentrated effort. Having more-detailed information on how students engaged in the program would be valuable for measuring the variety of ways that participation could occur.

Limitations: Proficiency Data

Using standardized tests in extensive reading

research is commonplace. Nakanishi’s (2014) meta-analysis highlights the wide variety of tests used. Nevertheless, to measure proficiency of young learners through standardized test scores also raises questions. The appropriateness of standardized testing for young learners given their developmental stage is debatable and test design and administration challenges for this age-group are significant (see McKay, 2006). The GTEC Junior suite of tests may have been designed specifically for young learners, but fundamental issues in standardized testing remain.

Furthermore, as shown in *Figure 3*, some students achieved maximum skill-based sub-scores on the test, and one student even received the maximum total score. Because of this score ceiling, these students’ proficiency levels may not be fully expressed by the scores they received, nor are the students’ proficiency levels accurately differentiated. Consider two students who received the maximum score of 140 in the listening section, for example. Their scores indicate they have identical proficiency. If, hypothetically, unlimited scores were possible, one student might have received a score of 150 and the other 200, thereby expressing different proficiency levels. When the value of a variable is limited, as these test scores are, correlation analysis results are less reliable.

Finally, it must be remembered what the standardized test score data does not reveal. It cannot be known what score any individual student would have received had they read less or not at all. With no pre-test, nor can changes in proficiency from the beginning of the academic year or the onset of the extensive reading program be determined. Likewise, there is no control group with which to compare test score data, and so the proficiency of young learners in this study cannot be compared to similarly-educated

peers who have not participated in an extensive reading program.

Data Interpretation

Issues with research methods aside, the study results have many possible explanations. It should be noted that Pearson’s correlation coefficient (*r*) is a *descriptive* statistic. It cannot explain why a certain relationship between pairs of variables may be present, simply that it exists. Speculation is possible on the cause of a certain correlation, but further study would be necessary for confirmation. Nevertheless, the prevalence of negative correlations between the variables indicating participation and those indicating proficiency cannot be ignored.

There are, however, logical explanations for this relationship which do not necessarily indicate that the prevalence of negative correlations is problematic. Consider the following possible situations:

1. Young learners with lower proficiency may receive greater support from teachers and parents. Such support could include reminders to read and reading assistance.
2. Young learners with lower proficiency may choose shorter, lower-level books than their higher-proficiency peers. Consequently, these books may be quicker to read and can be read a greater number of times during the borrowing period. Conversely, higher-proficiency young learners may choose relatively more advanced books that take longer to read, resulting in a lower tally count.
3. Young learners with lower proficiency may

	Total score	Listening score	Reading score	Speaking score	Writing score
Grade 5 (9 students)	-	2	2	1	-
Grade 6 (18 students)	1	11	12	5	1

Figure 3: Number of students receiving maximum score

- require multiple readings of a book to understand, enjoy, and/or feel mastery of it. Higher-proficiency young learners may understand, enjoy, and/or feel mastery of their selected book more quickly, and so are less inclined to read it multiple times.
4. Once young learners with lower proficiency feel mastery of a selected book, they may feel greater confidence in their language ability with additional readings. An increase in confidence may be a stronger motivational force to continue reading the same selection for young learners with lower proficiency than those with higher proficiency.
 5. Higher-proficiency young learners may be engaged in extracurricular English activities. Lower proficiency students may not be engaged in such activities, and because of it, they are able to devote more time to reading their selected books.

While the above situations do not necessarily indicate the prevalence of negative correlations as indicative of underlying problems, other situations can be imagined where it is:

1. Young learners with lower proficiency may feel more greatly pressured by teachers and parents to read and come to associate negative feelings with English. Such feelings may create resentment, limit their interest in English, and decrease motivation to learn. Without additional attention, higher-proficiency young learners may read less than they would if given additional support.
2. Repeated reading without any resulting increase in understanding or enjoyment may cause frustration in lower-proficiency young learners. Similarly to the preceding situation, this may ultimately lead to decreased

motivation for language learning.

3. Young learners with lower proficiency may be focused on repetition over other reading and learning strategies that could be more appropriate for their particular needs. Engaging with English books in a different way could increase the benefits derived from reading.
4. Younger learners with lower proficiency may compare themselves negatively to their classmates. They may feel discouraged if they perceive that they are reading relatively more, but not receiving relatively higher scores. This could also result in a lack of confidence in their existing ability.
5. Younger learners with higher proficiency, perceiving their relative strength in English, may develop a high level of confidence. They may then decide that it is not necessary to read as frequently as their lower-proficiency classmates, thereby unintentionally blunting the potential benefits of increased exposure to English.

Neither of the above lists are intended to be exhaustive. There could be many such situations for either category. By imagining various scenarios, however, it becomes even more apparent that the particular reasons for the negative correlations and statistically insignificant results of this study are unknown and that the possible explanations are greatly varied. Better understanding of the cause of negative correlation would allow any problems, if they are discovered to be present, to be addressed.

V Conclusion

This study reveals that proficiency differences, as measured through standardized testing, between young learner classmates cannot be simply explained as a matter of reading frequency. From this, it is clear that

more research is needed to untangle the relationship between younger learners, reading, and proficiency in a foreign language.

First and foremost, it must be investigated whether the results of this study are indicative of a true problem that should be addressed, or whether they are instead a naturally-occurring tendency that can be expected among young learners of differing proficiency levels. To do this, the individual characteristics, behaviors, and environmental influences of younger learners participating in such an extensive reading program must be identified. The differences between individual younger learners are likely to be much more complex than reading frequency reveals. It could be these differences that more strongly relate to standardized test scores and other measures of learning.

Alternative research methods could also provide greater insight. In particular, it may be more valuable to track individual changes in proficiency while participating in extensive reading rather than comparing young learner classmates to one another. It may also be enlightening to continue to monitor the progress of younger learners as they move through secondary education. It is possible that the effects of increased exposure to English through an extensive reading program will become more apparent once greater cognitive development has been achieved.

By refocusing the investigation of extensive reading and employing alternative research methods, it is hoped that results which have greater statistical significance than those in this study can be achieved. This would contribute to a deeper understanding of the young learner experience of extensive reading, and could reveal predictors of success and warning signs of struggle. Though deeper understanding, extensive reading programs could be more-tailored to younger learners so that they can reap the rewards both now and as they continue their English education into the future.

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